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THREE PLAYS BY NOEL LESLIE

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THREE PLAYS

BY NOEL LESLIE

WASTE .·. THE WAR-FLY
FOR KING AND COUNTRY

BOSTON
THE FOUR SEAS COMPANY
1920

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TO
MY WIFE

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WASTE

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CHARACTERS

FRED LACEY, *a musician.*
AGNES, *his wife.*
MARIAN, WINIFRED, } *their daughters.*
CHARLEY JACKSON, *a young engineer.*

Time: The first decade of the twentieth century.

Scene: The sitting-room of the Laceys' cottage in the town of Winfleet, England.

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WASTE

The action of the play passes in the sitting-room of the Laceys' cottage at Winfleet, a town in one of the eastern counties of England. It is a bleak evening in March. Darkness has fallen and the night promises to be stormy. There are occasional gusts of wind which rattle the windows and moan round the eaves. A street lamp from without throws a yellow beam through the unshuttered bay window, diffusing a little light throughout the room, and falling directly upon the solitary figure seated within. The distempered walls are damp, here and there, in ominous looking patches. The floor is covered with an old and tattered carpet. The ceiling is dirty and cracked. A piece of lead piping protrudes from the centre, but is useless, the gas supply being cut off. Down to the right stands a straight-backed horsehair chair, one of a set of six, and immediately above it a door leads to the kitchen on the right, the light from which is visible under the sill. In the centre of the wall to the right is the fireplace. The hearth is surrounded by an unpolished fender and is furnished with but two irons, a thin poker and a meagre shovel with a large hole in the scoop. A miserable fire smoulders in the grate. There is no receptacle either for coal or other firing. The wooden man-

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telpiece is painted to resemble marble, and the shelf is covered by a dull red cloth with a torn fringe. Upon this stand: a cheap alarm clock, flanked by two inverted china cups, two vases, some pipes in a rack, a matchbox and several photographs. Two views, framed in green plush, hang on the wall above with a family group between. In the corner up to the right is a nine-inch drain pipe, converted into an umbrella stand, and in front of this is another chair. The bay window is fitted with yellow blinds and dressed by two skimpy curtains.

This window fills the right centre of the back wall and in it stands an oblong wicker worktable bearing a well kept fern set in a blue bowl, this receptacle being much cracked and chipped. A third chair stands between the window and the door up to the left. This door opens inwards directly from the street. There is a knocker outside and an inverted horseshoe loosely nailed to the inside. A dilapidated door-mat lies on the threshold. Against the left wall to the centre is an upright piano with its attendant screw-top stool. The upper part of the instrument is littered with music and in the centre is a white hyacinth in a red pot standing in a saucer. The keyboard is closed. Below the piano is another chair. In the middle of the room are two more chairs and a circular table of mahogany, its green cloth much stained. An oil lamp, unlit, is in its centre and to the right a pitcher of water and a glass. An armchair with two hard cushions and a pillow is placed to the right on the outer edge of the black hearthrug.

The general effect is one of poor respectability.

There should be sufficient light from the foots for every article to be discernable.

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As the curtain rises, Marian is discovered, seated in the armchair. She is a young woman of twenty-seven. Although at one time beautiful, her body is now wasted by disease. The face is oval and of sallow complexion, save for a hectic flush on either cheek. The eyes are dark and unnaturally bright, the lips thin and compressed. Her black hair is parted in the middle, and hangs in two plaits over her thin shoulders. A few stray wisps curl limply on her forehead and neck, damp with the sweat of the consumptive. She wears an old red flannel kimono, a dark skirt, black cotton stockings, and red felt slippers with pompoms. Her sleeves are rolled back to the elbows, showing her wasted arms and the transparent hands are folded in her lap. She is leaning back against the cushions with her head on the pillow, her whole attitude being one of extreme exhaustion.

After a pause she rises, very slowly and with much effort and moves painfully to the mantle-shelf. She leans upon it for support until she can regain her breath. A racking, choking cough seizes her. The fit having passed, she wipes her mouth with her handkerchief and takes the matchbox from the shelf. Crossing to the table she removes the chipped globe and funnel from the lamp with extreme care and, carefully rubbing the wick, lights it. This operation completed she turns, looks at the clock, which shows a few minutes after eight, and moves as if to go up to the window. As she starts however, another fit of coughing arrests her. Grasping the back of the chair she crawls into it and collapses, moaning faintly and clutching at her breast. She then lets her hands fall to the arms of the

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chair and moves her head feebly from side to side.

Enter from the kitchen at the right her mother, AGNES LACEY. She is a little creature, incredibly thin, dressed entirely in black with a blouse of sateen. Her face is angular and emaciated, with high cheekbones and prominent jaw. Several of the front teeth are missing. The eyes are red, the skin chapped, and the mouth thin-lipped and quivering. Her scanty brown hair, rapidly turning grey, is tightly pulled over from her forehead into a small hard knot at the back. The hands are bony and red, thoroughly coarsened by incessant hard work. She moves quickly and noiselessly, rubbing her hands together, clasping and unclasping, or plucking with them at her skirt. She is abnormally nervous and apprehensive, starting violently at every sound. Altogether she presents a pathetic and heart-rending appearance.

AGNES. [*going up to window and drawing blinds.*] Why ever didn't you call me? It's wrong to make yourself cough like that over an old lamp.

[*She finishes drawing blinds*]

Why did you do it?

MARIAN. Charley may be here any moment. I don't want him to find everything dark.

AGNES. [*Coming above armchair*] How do you feel now?

MARIAN. Oh, just the same.

AGNES *takes the matches from the table and places them on the pipe-rack. She sighs heavily.*

Isn't Winnie home yet?

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AGNES. No, the wicked girl. Her supper's been ready an hour or more.

MARIAN. Mother, could you manage a little more coal?

AGNES. [*Going right*] I'll try. It *is* cold in here.

[*Exit right.*]

MARIAN *glances at the clock, re-settles herself in her chair and clears her throat. There is a sound off to the right as of scraping out a coal-scuttle. Presently* AGNES *re-enters bearing a large shovel half full of coal-dust which she proceeds to pour carefully into the dying fire. It flares a little, but soon settles down to its former smoky smoulder.*

AGNES. [*Turning with empty shovel*] That's all I can manage.

She exits right and returns without the shovel and closes the door.

There's not another shovelful in the house.

MARIAN. The doctor told me to keep warm. It's so cold in bed. We must get some more fire to-morrow.

AGNES. [*Sitting right of table*] Lord knows where it'll come from. Your cough's no better to-day?

MARIAN. It's as well as ever it will be.

AGNES. You mustn't talk that way Marian. They let you out of the hospital didn't they?

MARIAN. Because they knew it was hopeless.

AGNES. Why, child, whatever do you mean?

MARIAN. Discharged as incurable.

[AGNES *protests.*]

Oh, don't let it worry you. I know. Galloping consumption. That's what the doctor told Charley.

AGNES. Charley?

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MARIAN. Yes. He told me. You couldn't hide it from me for ever, you know. Besides, I'd rather be told.

[*The wind moans without.*]

AGNES. Oh dear, Oh dear. What's to become of me?

[*She rocks herself to and fro, beginning to weep.*]

MARIAN. Perhaps Dad'll begin to realize things now.

AGNES. We shall never manage, never. I can't do anything without you. You've been so good . . . so good . . . always. I'll never have a penny if you go.

MARIAN. I shan't make so much difference. Winnie'll be earning soon.

AGNES. [*Scornfully*] She won't earn enough to keep a cat. We'll end in the workhouse, that's what'll happen . . . the workhouse.

MARIAN. Well, it's no use crying about it. When do you expect Dad?

AGNES. [*Petulantly*] I don't know.

MARIAN. We must make him understand somehow. Where has he been to-day?

AGNES. Minster. For Julia Perry and Annie Franklin's lessons. That means three shillings. He ought to be back by now. It's choir-practice to-night at eight-thirty. He'll never get there in time, even if he's able. They'll take the organ away from him.

MARIAN. Mother!

AGNES. They said they would the next time 'e wasn't sober.

MARIAN. He's never gone to practice . . . bad, has he?

AGNES. Yes, 'e 'as. And next time 'e'll get the sack. I know. The sack. You see if 'e doesn't. It'll be to-night, too.

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MARIAN. [*Glancing at the clock*] P'r'aps he's gone straight to Church without coming home?

AGNES. 'e won't go straight anywhere, not with three shillings in 'is pocket.

MARIAN. There's the fare?

AGNES. That's only five pence ha'penny, and 'e 'ad that when he left this morning. And I 'aven't got a penny . . . not one.

MARIAN. Never mind. I've something left. Enough for the coal, and some bread and milk. It'll keep us going till my cheque comes.

AGNES. Another cheque?

MARIAN. Yes.

AGNES. [*Drying her eyes*] Well, that's good news.

MARIAN. The clerk wrote to say they were granting me another month's salary. That makes six months' leave of absence on full pay. They've been very kind.

AGNES. Kind? So they ought. 'Aven't you always been a good teacher? [*Eagerly*] 'ow much will it be?

MARIAN...About six pounds ten.

AGNES. We owe three pounds for rent.

MARIAN. Pay one pound on account. That'll keep them quiet for a few weeks.

[*She has another coughing fit.* AGNES *pours out some water and makes her sip it. The wind moans.*]

Ah, well, things might be worse. Winnie should hear from the managers soon. She's very late, mother. Don't you think she stays out too long?

AGNES. I can't control 'er a bit. I'm not to blame. She's got a bit of 'er father in 'er; that's what's the matter. It won't be drink, though, please God.

MARIAN. It couldn't be worse, could it?

AGNES. No, that it couldn't. [*Sobs.*]

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MARIAN. I expect Dick Webster's out with her.

AGNES. Well, 'e's a good boy. Not like Charley, though.

MARIAN. No, there's only one Charley. [*She looks at the clock.*] I hope he'll come. He's dreadfully late.

AGNES. It's rather windy for cycling maybe. There's not many who'd ride sixteen miles on a night like this.

MARIAN. He'll come, though. Poor Charley, I knew I'd bring him trouble . . . nothing but trouble. You know, mother, I haven't told him much about Dad.

AGNES. Just as well.

MARIAN. I was afraid it'd make a difference.

AGNES. No wonder.

MARIAN. But it wouldn't 'ave. He'll *never* change.

AGNES. That's the way I used to talk.

MARIAN. We'd have been engaged now if it hadn't been for his people. They wouldn't hear of it.

AGNES. Why?

MARIAN. He's younger for one thing, and I suppose they thought I wasn't good enough.

AGNES. MARIAN!

MARIAN. It's natural.

[*A door bangs off to the right and a clumsy clattering is heard in the kitchen. The women exchange meaning looks.*]

AGNES. [*Rising and going noiselessly to the right.*] I'll see 'e doesn't come in 'ere. Don't let Charley go without seeing me. [*Exit right.*]

[MARIAN *sighs heavily. The noise continues and is accompanied by the sound of voices.*

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She clears her throat and looks toward the pitcher. She starts to rise when the door up to the left is flung open and WINIFRED *enters. She is a lithe, pretty girl of sixteen, dressed in a blue serge coat and short skirt, a thin white cotton blouse with a dark red tie, red tam o' shanter, black shoes and stockings. She carries a satchel full of books. Her hair is dark and hangs down her back in one thick plait. Her face is beautifully chiseled, very flushed, and her eyes are sparkling. She stands in the doorway, panting slightly, her thin lips moist and parted, her nostrils quivering with excitement.*]

WINIFRED. Hello, sis!

MARIAN. Hush.

[WINIFRED, *subdued, closes the door quietly, places the satchel on a chair, comes to the centre above the table and removes her jacket.*]

Give me a drink, Winnie.

WINIFRED. Sorry.

[*She takes the glass to* MARIAN, *and kisses her before she can drink.*]

Is he . . . ?

MARIAN. Yes.

WINIFRED. When'd he come in?

MARIAN. Just before you.

[WINIFRED *places the glass on the table and sits right centre.*]

WINIFRED. [*Shuddering involuntarily*] Old beast!

MARIAN. Are you cold?

WINIFRED. Cold? I've been cold all winter, so

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I'm used to it. S'pose *I'll* have a cough next. Might as well die for all he'd care.

MARIAN. Don't dear, you mustn't. What's the news?

WINIFRED. Not much. I'm to start school here in September. Pupil teacher.

MARIAN. Winnie, I *am* glad! Mother *will* be pleased. [*Kisses her.*]

WINIFRED. Fat lot I'll get out of it.

MARIAN. How much to start?

WINIFRED. Start? Eighteen pounds for a whole year.

MARIAN. Eighteen. That's twelve . . . one . . . and six . . . ten. One pound ten. Thirty shillings a month. It isn't so bad. More than I got.

WINIFRED. Well, I think it's rotten. Six shillings a week, teaching grubby little brats all day. Ugh.

[*She crosses her legs disgustedly and sprawls, with her head on her hand, the arm resting on the table.*]

MARIAN. Think what it'll mean to Mother. Six shillings is a good deal. You must think of her.

WINIFRED. Why doesn't Dad think of her? You've thought of her all your life and look what it's brought you. [*There is a pause.*] Aren't I ever going to have any fun?

MARIAN. You have a good deal more than I had.

WINIFRED. It's a fat lot, isn't it? Besides, Dad wasn't so bad when you were my age. I've heard you tell of all sorts of good times before we came here.

MARIAN. Why were you so late to-night?

WINIFRED. What's that got to do with it?

MARIAN. Dick Webster I suppose. Where did he take you?

WINIFRED. Why should he take me anywhere?

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MARIAN. You'd have been in the kitchen long ago if you hadn't had supper, Dad or no Dad.

WINIFRED. [*Scornfully*] Old bread and butter!

MARIAN. Bread and butter's good at any time, especially when you're hungry.

WINIFRED. There's no harm in having a boy stand you a cup of tea, is there?

MARIAN. Harm? I never said so. That's what I call having a good time.

WINIFRED. Is it? Well, I don't. But there's not much chance of my getting anything better if I stay here. Swotting for all these beastly exams, slaving for a few measly shillings, and then giving it all to Mother for Dad to . . .

MARIAN. Don't.

WINIFRED. It's true . . . for Dad to drink! I'm sick of it . . . that's all. [*She goes up left for satchel.*] I'm not a kid any more. I'm sick of it . . . absolutely sick of it. Charley knows. [*Coming centre.*] Charley doesn't think I ought to go on putting up with it.

[*She goes right to door.*]

MARIAN. Charley! What do you mean? Putting up with what?

WINIFRED. Oh, he knows. He's not a fool. Everybody knows about Dad. Clear out . . . that's what Charley says. Teach if you must . . . but not near home . . . clear out. [*Musingly*] I wonder if he meant what he said? Oh, I wish I could go to Devonshire . . . I wish . . .

MARIAN. Devonshire . . . Devonshire . . . ?

[WINIFRED *looks embarrassed.*]

What are you talking about? Winnie . . . what did Charley say about Devonshire?

WINIFRED. [*Confusedly*] Nothing . . . nothing.

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I don't know why I said it . . . really . . . [*She goes to Marian and kneels, putting her arms round her.*] 'Cos it's the other side of England, I suppose. I want to go away. That's the farthest place I could think of.

MARIAN. [*Kissing her*] I know dear, I know. But you mustn't let yourself feel like that. You mustn't listen to what anybody says . . not even Charley. Do what you feel to be right, what you feel is your duty. I've always felt that my first duty was to Mother. That is the right thing. She will need you presently, dear. You mustn't dream of leaving her.

WINIFRED. Oh, I wish I were like you. I'm a selfish little cat . . . but I do so want to be happy. Oh, sis, I do love you. You'll always believe that, won't you . . . whatever happens?

MARIAN. Yes, dear, of course. [*They comfort each other.*] I do wish he'd come.

WINIFRED. Charley? Is he coming? To-night?

MARIAN. I think so. He promised to.

WINIFRED. [*Rising*] It looked like rain just now. If it rains he'll have to catch the 9.10.

MARIAN. That's why I wish he'd come now. I shall have him for such a little time.

[*Re-enter* AGNES.]

AGNES. [*To* WINIFRED] You naughty girl. Where 'ave you been?

WINIFRED. [*Exuberantly*] It's all right, "Mumps." I've had supper and I'm going to teach school here . . in September.

[*She flings herself onto her mother and overwhelms all her protestations.*]

AGNES. Don't make such a noise, child. Mind your father. [*To* MARIAN] 'e won't eat anything.

MARIAN. Is he going to practice?

AGNES. Yes . . . presently.

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MARIAN. He'll be late.

AGNES. Wants to see you first.

[WINIFRED *is getting her satchel and hat.*]

Your supper's waiting, Winnie.

WINIFRED. [*Coming to door right*] Don't want any, thanks. I'm going to swot.

[AGNES *motions fearfully toward the kitchen.*]

Pooh. He can't scare me. [*Exit*]

[*The wind moans.* AGNES *turns up the lamp.*]

MARIAN. What does he want? Money?

AGNES. Yes.

MARIAN. You told him I . . . ?

AGNES. [*Nervously*] No, but . . .

MARIAN. What?

AGNES. He knows I had some from Charley. He wants . . . he wants you to ask him for more.

MARIAN. [*Aghast*] Ask Charley for money? You never told me he'd . . . oh, Mother, . . . and you told him Charley was coming?

AGNES. No . . . No. He wants you to write.

MARIAN. Where's the money he earned to-day? Didn't he give the lessons?

AGNES. He's spent it all. The return fare . . . and his lunch . . . and then . . . he stopped at the "Lion," on the way home from the station.

[MARIAN *chokes and coughs. Enter* FRED LACEY. AGNES *shrinks away, and exits right, closing the door quietly after her.* LACEY *is a tall, well-built man of forty-seven, carefully but shabbily dressed. His hair is dark and curly, and a fine moustache covers his upper lip. He is decidedly good-looking, but bloated with drink. His eyes are rheumy and blood-*

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shot. His hands delicate and artistic, but very shaky. He speaks thickly, being only half-sober. As MARIAN *stops coughing he edges uneasily to the chair left of the table.*]

FRED. Well, old girl . . . cough bad?

MARIAN. No, Dad.

FRED. Pretty bad, I reckon. Mind if I sit down a minute? Won't upset you?

MARIAN. Of course not. Did you have a good day?

FRED. Not very. Those girls'll never learn the piano. Can't teach 'em anything . . . no sense.

MARIAN. See anyone I know?

FRED. Old Timmins asked after you. Bert Stebbing.

MARIAN. Bert? How is he?

FRED. Doing fine. Building a new skiff for Beecham.

MARIAN. Really. Good old Bert. Where'd you see him?

FRED. [*embarrassed*] Down town.

MARIAN. The "Lion"?

FRED. [*Rising*] I'd just stopped in for a minute.

MARIAN. Dad, I wish you wouldn't. [*He starts to go.*] Dad . . . don't go without giving me a kiss.

[FRED *crosses behind table and kisses her.*]

FRED. Sorry, old girl . . . sorry.

MARIAN. Bring the chair closer, Dad. [*He does so.*] Sit down. [*He sits.*] Dad, try and do something for your little girl, will you?

FRED. What?

MARIAN. Don't go to the "Lion" so often. Or anywhere like that . . . please. We can't afford it.

FRED. All right. I'll try. That's all right, . . . you're a good girl.

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MARIAN. I . . . I can't help you any more . . . now.

FRED. Eh. You're not that bad, lass. You're not . . . ?

MARIAN. Not yet. But I've had to resign.

FRED. Resign. Why?

MARIAN. I can't work any more. I shall never go back. No more school for me. No more money . . .

[*She chokes.*]

FRED. [*Rising*] No more money? There's Winnie. She ought to be earning now. [*Trying to comfort her*] That's all right, lass. Don't cry. You've done your best for your poor old father. [*He feels in his pockets for his pipe.* Must have lost it. [*He sees pipe-rack on mantle.*] Have to take an old one. [*He crosses, takes one and, in withdrawing it, pulls the rack against one of the inverted china cups.*] That's all right, old girl. Don't worry. There's Charley Jackson.

MARIAN. You can't do it! You shan't do it! Haven't you any pride?

FRED. [*Maudlinly*] Well . . . the money's got to come from somewhere. He'll lend us a bit surely.

MARIAN. He hasn't got any.

FRED. He gave your mother a sovereign two weeks ago.

MARIAN. [*Reproachfully*] And you let her take it . . .

FRED. *Let* her take it? I wasn't there. [*With a drunken chuckle*] Only wish I had been. I didn't get half of it . . . not half. [*He puts his pipe in his mouth and clumsily reaches for the match-box by the rack. The cup is now on the very edge of the shelf.*] I don't know where the money's coming from unless you write to Charley. Wish to Heaven I did. [*His*

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sleeve catches the cup and it falls to the floor with a crash. A silver coin that has lain hidden beneath it rolls to his feet. MARIAN *cannot rise in time to secure it.*] Hullo, what's this? Half a crown? Well, I'm blessed. Who says they don't believe in prayer now? Direct answer to prayer. Dropped straight from Heaven. [*He puts the coin in his pocket.*]

MARIAN. [*Despairingly*] Give it back, Dad. It's mine. I must have it. We haven't a penny. It's for bread and milk . . . there isn't a bit of coal in the house. [*A bicycle bell rings loudly off left.*] Charley!!

FRED. [*Opening the door to the right, greatly relieved*] Charley, eh? Another bit o' luck. Save a stamp. See? Don't have to write now. Ask him.

[*Exit right.*]

[MARIAN *drops back limply into her chair. There is the sound, off, of a man jumping from his bicycle and the machine being placed up against the wall. A stamping of feet is followed by a knock at the door.*]

MARIAN. [*Feebly*] Winnie!

[WINIFRED *enters right immediately. She has been standing outside in hopeful anticipation of the new arrival. She crosses to the door left, flings it open, stands back and watches eagerly as* CHARLEY JACKSON *enters. He is a dark, slim young man of twenty-four, clad in a Norfolk suit, with thick woolen stockings and tan boots. His cap is stuck in his belt and he stands on the threshold, wiping the perspiration from his face and neck with his handkerchief.*]

CHARLEY. [*To* WINIFRED] Hullo!

[WINIFRED *holds out her hand which he takes. He then crosses to* MARIAN, *bends over, and*

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kisses her. The wind moans. He takes his cap from his belt and throws it on the table. WINIFRED *watches his every movement.*]

MARIAN. [*To* WINIFRED] The door.

WINIFRED. Shall I bring the bike in?

CHARLEY. No. I don't think it'll rain. Too much wind.

[WINIFRED *closes the door.* CHARLEY *sits by* MARIAN'S *side.* WINIFRED *comes down centre and looks at them.*]

WINIFRED. If it rains you'll have to catch the nine train. [*She nods toward the clock. He follows her gaze.*] Not much time.

MARIAN. [*Quietly but firmly*] Good-night, Winnie.

[WINIFRED *goes to them and, as she bends over to kiss her sister, gives her right hand to* CHARLEY. *He presses it for several moments.* WINIFRED *straightens and goes to door right. She has flushed scarlet.*]

WINIFRED. Be good. [*Exit right.*]

CHARLEY. Little beggar!

MARIAN. She's a strange girl. Wants it to rain now, so she can go to the station with you. Always wants to be out.

CHARLEY. [*Deliberately changing the subject*] How have you been?

MARIAN. Not very well, dear.

CHARLEY. Poor kid.

[*He makes as if to kiss her, but she stops him.*]

MARIAN. No. No more. It's not right. You should never kiss my mouth.

CHARLEY. Oh, rot. That's all piffle. Besides, I don't care. If I'm going to catch it, I am, that's all.

[*He kneels by her side and takes her head on*

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his shoulder, kissing her passionately. Presently he sits on the floor, his right arm over her knee.]

MARIAN. You're awfully late.

CHARLEY. Yes. Been hard at it all day. Beastly tired. Couldn't leave till nearly seven. Head wind up, too.

MARIAN. You shouldn't have come.

CHARLEY. I had to, dear. Five minutes is better than no time at all.

[*He is playing with the pom-poms on her shoes. She kisses his head.*]

MARIAN. Do you remember when you gave me these?

CHARLEY. Yes.

MARIAN. The first time you came to the hospital.

CHARLEY. Christmas eve. Rummy Christmas, wasn't it?

MARIAN. We've had some good times together, though, haven't we?

CHARLEY. Rather.

[*Her left hand strokes his hair. Her right lies on his shoulder.*]

MARIAN. It's all over now.

CHARLEY. [*Kissing her hand*] Don't say that.

MARIAN. I always told you you'd regret it.

CHARLEY. But I don't.

MARIAN. It'd have been better for you if we'd never known each other. Your people were right after all.

CHARLEY. Rot. Just because I'm a couple of years younger? That's no reason. If it hadn't been for the beastly illness they'd have come round in time.

MARIAN. Perhaps. Even if they had, you mightn't have cared for me then.

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CHARLEY. Marian, you know I never break a promise.

MARIAN. I'd rather you did than be miserable through keeping one. No, it's all for the best.

[*The door right opens.* CHARLEY *rises.* FRED *enters awkwardly, hat in hand.*]

FRED. Hullo, Charley! Nice night.

CHARLEY. [*Holding out his hand*] Bit windy. How d'you do?

FRED. [*Shaking hands*] Glad to see you. [*He moves up left.*] Just going out.

MARIAN. You'll be late for practice, Dad.

FRED. [*Drunkenly, as he puts on hat*] Going down street. Get some things. [*Winking*] Bread, milk and coal. Very important. [*He winks again.*] [*Chuckling, he fumbles with the door-knob, then turns and grins.*] Most important. [*He opens door.*] [*Winking*] Shan't be long. Good-night. [*Exit left.*]

[CHARLEY *sits right of table, then turns to* MARIAN *protestingly.*]

MARIAN. Don't, don't say anything against him.

CHARLEY. But is he always like this?

MARIAN. He's all right at heart.

CHARLEY. And yet you say everything's for the best. I don't see it. Good Lord, what an awful time you must have had. You must have kept the whole family.

MARIAN. Well, I can't any more. I'll get my last cheque next week. I've had to resign.

CHARLEY. I knew it'd come to that. I only wish I could do something for you.

MARIAN. No, no, you can't. You mustn't do any more. Oh, I know. Mother let it out this evening But you've got to promise never to do it again. It

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nearly killed me to think that you should give her money.

CHARLEY. Now, dear, you mustn't get upset. I didn't *give* it. I just *lent* it. It's nothing. Cheer up. Something's bound to happen. [*They embrace.*]

MARIAN. As long as you come to see me, that's all I want. [*He looks uncomfortable.*] You won't stop coming to see me, will you, Charley? I can't live without you. I haven't long anyway, but if it weren't for you, I'd kill myself. Sometimes I wish to God I could die quicker. [*He hides his face, and gives a stifled sob.*] I know I don't stand a chance. It's just a question of time. The only thing I regret is leaving you, and I can't bear to do that.

[*He clings to her.*]

CHARLEY. It's a rotten shame! A rotten shame!! [*The tears roll down his cheeks as he kisses her.*] I've prayed every night for months that you'd get well, and this is the answer. It's all no good.

MARIAN. God knows best.

CHARLEY. What right have you to suffer like this? What have you done? Nothing. You're the finest, the best girl that ever lived. I don't believe you've ever done a single wrong thing. Just sacrificed yourself for your people.

MARIAN. [*Smiling*] You still love me, don't you, Charley?

CHARLEY. Of course I do. I worship you. I'd give anything to save you. Why can't we be happy? Oh, I did hope . . .

MARIAN. Never mind, dear. We've always done right.

CHARLEY. I almost wish we hadn't. Look how we've suffered. Why not your father? It isn't fair.

MARIAN. We can't judge him, dear. I daresay he's miserable enough, poor old Dad. Besides, I'll be

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happy soon. I don't care what happens . . . afterwards. Peace . . . that's all I want . . . Peace . . . and rest.

CHARLEY. Don't . . . don't!

MARIAN. I want you to promise me something. I shall never be able to marry you, but some day you'll find someone you'll want. Don't let any thought of me stand in the way.

CHARLEY. I'll never marry anyone . . . never.

MARIAN. Yes you will, dear. You must. I could almost hate the girl, though. She'll be lucky. But, if there's such a thing as a guardian angel . . . I'll be yours.

[*He hides his face in his hands. Presently he rises, goes to the window, pulls up the blind and looks out. He wipes his eyes surreptitiously, then re-draws the blind. He comes left of the table.*]

CHARLEY. I . . . I've been trying to tell you something ever since I came in. It's dreadfully hard, and it gets worse . . . harder . . . every minute.

MARIAN. Don't be afraid, dear. As long as you love me and come to see me I can bear anything.

CHARLEY. That's just it. I've got a chance.

MARIAN. You mean . . . ?

CHARLEY. I've been offered an appointment.

MARIAN. Away?

CHARLEY. Yes.

MARIAN. Far?

CHARLEY. Yes, dear.

MARIAN. You're going?

CHARLEY. I feel I ought to take it. I can't go on where I am for ever. I'm hardly getting any money there, and this means . . . well . . . a steady job and promotion.

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MARIAN. Of course you must take it.

CHARLEY. The devil of it is that it's so far away.

MARIAN. Have you accepted?

CHARLEY. Yes.

MARIAN. Well, it had to come, sometime. When must you go?

CHARLEY. Next week.

MARIAN. Next week! . . . what day?

CHARLEY. Wednesday.

MARIAN. [*Rising*] But, you're . . . you're coming to see me again?

CHARLEY. I'll try to, dear.

MARIAN. Oh! [*He takes her in his arms.*] Don't leave me . . . don't leave me. I can't bear it. I thought I could, but I can't. Charley, I can't. You mustn't go. It's too much. Wait a little longer. It's only you who've kept me going. I can't bear to leave you. Charley, don't let me go. [*There is a pause as they cling together.*] You'll come and see me sometimes, won't you?

CHARLEY. I can't for a long time, dear.

MARIAN. I'll be dead by then. Where are you going. Where is it?

CHARLEY. Place called Tulford, in Devonshire. It's a good job.

MARIAN. Where?

CHARLEY. Tulford, Devonshire.

[MARIAN *slowly pushes him from her.*]

MARIAN. Devonshire?

CHARLEY. Yes. It's a rotten long way, isn't it?

MARIAN. Devonshire. [*She sinks into her chair. He stands over her, miserably. There is a knock at the door right. Enter* AGNES.]

AGNES. [*To* CHARLEY] Are you going back by train?

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CHARLEY. Why? Is it raining?

AGNES. Winnie says so.

CHARLEY. Good Lord.

[*He crosses to the door left and opens it, looking out at the sky.*]

MARIAN. [*Slowly*] Where is Winnie?

AGNES. Putting something on Charley's bike to keep the rain off.

MARIAN. [*Smiling bitterly*] Oh.

CHARLEY. [*Coming in*] It's not much. Just spitting. I'll risk it.

[*Enter* WINIFRED *from front door.*]

WINIFRED. Rotten luck, old top.

CHARLEY. Oh, it's not hard enough to matter. I'll ride.

WINIFRED. You won't. Tire's punctured.

CHARLEY. Punctured? Which one?

WINIFRED. The back.

[CHARLEY *exits left.*]

AGNES. Dear, dear!

MARIAN. [*To* WINIFRED, *meaningly*] How did it happen?

WINIFRED. [*Defiantly*] How should I know? [*She crosses to door right.*] Going to get my mac.

[*She exits right.*]

CHARLEY. [*Re-entering*] 'Fraid I'll have to train it. Bad slit. Can't think how it happened.

AGNES. The flints on that road are dreadful, aren't they, Marian?

MARIAN. Are they?

[CHARLEY *takes his cap.*]

AGNES. [*To* MARIAN] What is it, dear? Do you feel faint?

MARIAN. [*As* CHARLEY *goes toward her*] No, no.

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I'm all right. Pain here. [*She touches her heart.*] That's all.

AGNES. [*Aside to* CHARLEY] She's a dreadful cough. I'm always afraid Winnie'll catch it.

MARIAN [*hears and smiles*]. Good-night, Charley.

AGNES [*kisses him*]. Shall I light your lamp?

CHARLEY. No, thanks. [*To* MARIAN] Good-bye, dear.

[*As he takes her hands, re-enter* WINIFRED *right, in her mackintosh.* MARIAN *tries to withdraw her hands, but he prevents her.*]

AGNES. Why, child! Wherever are you going?

WINIFRED. To see Charley off.

AGNES. Well, I never.

WINIFRED. [*Crossing to door up left*] You'd better hurry up. Not much time. It's all right, Mother. Shan't be late.

MARIAN. Good-bye, Charley. Don't forget.

[*They embrace. He breaks away, puts on his cap, and goes above table centre. She stretches her arms after him.* AGNES *and* WINIFRED *watch. He feels her agony and, turning quickly, strains her to him. There is a pause. Suddenly* WINIFRED *pulls the door open violently. The horse-shoe, tearing out from its nail, clangs to the floor.* AGNES *gasps in superstitious horror.* WINIFRED *kicks it contemptuously out into the street.*]

WINIFRED. Jolly good job. P'r'aps the luck'll change now. [*To* CHARLEY] Come on.

[*He releases* MARIAN, *turns abruptly, and follows* WINIFRED *out up left.* AGNES *goes to the door.* MARIAN, *till now motionless, collapses in the arm-chair right. The lamp flickers. The room grows perceptibly darker.*]

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AGNES. [*Examining the lamp*] The oil's giving out. I hope Winnie'll hurry back. [*She looks at* MARIAN *and perceives that her daughter wishes to be alone.* AGNES *goes right.*] Anything I can do for you, dear?

MARIAN. [*Slowly*] When Winnie comes in, tell her to keep away from me.

AGNES. [*Innocently*] Yes. Your cough is bad to-night. She must be careful.

[*Exit* AGNES *right.*]

[MARIAN *waits till the door is closed, then takes a deep breath. She begins to gasp deep, heart-breaking sobs. She bends forward, lifting the poker and raking out the ashes of the fire. A terrific gust of wind shakes the house. She drops the poker and leans back in the chair. Tears run down her cheeks. Her sobs become uncontrollable. The lamp, which has been continually flickering, goes out.*]

THE CURTAIN FALLS

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THE WAR FLY

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CHARACTERS

THE DINER-OUT
THE OTHER MAN
THE WAITER

Time: The present.

Scene: A private dining-room in a London hotel.

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THE WAR FLY

It is a chilly October evening in the year 1915. The dining-room has two large French windows opening on to a balcony. These occupy practically the entire length of the black wall. The blinds are not drawn, but the curtains successfully veil any illumination from the room that might otherwise escape. The lights of London are shaded, on account of the Zeppelin raids, and the stars shine palely through a thin mist. There is no moon nor any glare from the streets below. Fitful flashes from powerful searchlights occasionally sweep the sky, lighting up the room within. There is a red glow from the fire left, and the shaded chandelier, hung low, sends out a circle of light sufficient to illumine the faces of the diners. Outside of this small circle, the room is in comparative darkness. The floor is heavily carpeted, the walls are panelled, and the furnishings are expensively luxurious. A door stands down right and above it a sideboard. In the corner up right is a screen, from behind which the dinner has been served. Two chairs stand, one on each side of the window, and a third and fourth down right and down left. The table, centre, has been laid for two, but the meal is now practically finished. The table decorations have been removed to the sideboard. The clock over the sideboard points to 9.30 p. m.

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As the curtain rises, the DINER-OUT (D. O.) *and the* OTHER MAN (O. M.) *are discovered at the table, centre. The* D. O. *is about 35 years of age and clad in the uniform of an English Army Captain. He wears a tooth-brush moustache, and has a bronzed and pleasant, if somewhat stern, countenance. The O. M. is of indeterminate middle-age. His hair is tinged with grey, and his clean-shaven face is pale and deeply lined. His eyes are large and arresting. He is attired in faultless evening dress. The* WAITER *is an elderly man of sixty-five. The* WAITER *replenishes the glasses, removes the last course, and brings the finger-bowls.*

WAITER. Coffee, sir?

O. M. And cigars.

[*The* WAITER *goes behind the screen up right.*]

[*To D. O.*] Shall we have liqueurs?

D. O. I think so, yes.

O. M. Any preference?

D. O. Not the slightest. What ever you say.

O. M. You flatter me!

D. O. Not at all. On the contrary, your choice has been so excellent throughout, that I shouldn't care to risk spoiling things at the end.

[*They drain their wine glasses. The* WAITER *returns with the coffee, which he serves.*]

WAITER. What cigars, gentlemen?

[O. M. *looks at* D. O.]

D. O. Corona.

O. M. Same. And liqueurs.

WAITER. Yes, sir. What choice, sir?

O. M. B. B. special.

WAITER. Very good, sir [*Exit right.*]

D. O. B. B. special, eh? Sounds good.

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O. M. I can recommend it very highly.

[*They sip their coffee.*]

D. O. You dine here often?

O. M. Quite frequently. Why?

D. O. I don't seem to remember this waiter. How long has he been here?

O. M. I really couldn't say. We'll ask him when he comes back.

D. O. [*Reminiscently*] I used to know every soul in the place.

[*There is a pause.*]

O. M. I take it you're not sorry we dined together?

D. O. Sorry? No. Distinctly the reverse. It's been a delightful evening. One doesn't get grub like this in the trenches, you know.

O. M. Hardly, I suppose. It's not bad tack here.

[*They finish their coffee. The searchlights flash.*]

O. M. You seemed determined to dine alone, Captain. How did you come to pick out this room?

[*Re-enter* WAITER *with box of cigars.*]

D. O. [*After a pause*] Well, that's something of a story.

O. M. A story, eh? That sounds exciting.

D. O. I'm sorry to disappoint you. It's an exceptionally dull one.

[*The* WAITER *hands box to* D. O.]

O. M. I wonder.

WAITER. We had to send out for the liqueur, sir. Won't be long. [*He holds box to* O. M.]

O. M. [*To* D. O.] Shall we wait or change the order?

D. O. I prefer to wait, if it's all the same to you. [*The* WAITER *strikes a match for him.*] I'm anxious

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to try this B. B. special. [*The* WAITER *grins.*] [*Lighting it*] It's good, eh? Well, you ought to know. [*The* WAITER *holds match for* O. M.] By the way, we were just talking about you.

WAITER. About me, sir?

O. M. [*Puffing at cigar*] I've an impression that I've seen you somewhere before.

D. O. I don't seem to remember you.

O. M. Weren't you at the Claridge?

WAITER. Yes, sir. It'll be ten years next Christmas since I first went to the Claridge. More than 'alf the staff 'ad to go, sir. It's the war, of course. I've been 'ere just three months, but business is pretty bad 'ere too.

D. O. I s'pose so.

WAITER. Of course we depend entirely on tips, gentlemen, and I've 'ardly made enough for smokes. That's why I'm leaving. Like my luck, business bucking up the very last night.

O. M. Last night, eh? Got another job?

WAITER. Yes, sir. I'm going to do my bit.

D. O. Good Lord, man. You're too old, surely?

WAITER. For the trenches, yes, sir. But not to 'ave a shot at this 'ere munition makin'.

D. O. Good for you.

WAITER. Thank you, sir. I feel as 'ow I ought to be doin' something for my country.

O. M. It's time you were doing something about those liqueurs.

WAITER. Don't 'ardly think they'll 'ave 'ad time to get 'ere yet, sir.

[*There is a sound as of guns.*]

D. O. Hullo. What's that?

WAITER. [*Edging up to window*] Sounds like guns, sir.

[*The searchlights flash.*]

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D. O. D'you think there's any chance of a "Zep," to-night?

WAITER. Can't say as I do, sir. It's 'ardly dark enough for a regular raid. Only a very slight mist, to-night, sir. [*He goes right*] I'll just see about those drinks, gentlemen.

[*Exit right.*]

D. O. Queer old card. Isn't he?

O. M. Very. You were saying something about a story when he interrupted us.

D. O. A story?

O. M. Yes. That exceptionally dull narrative of yours.

D. O. Oh. About my wanting to dine here alone?

O. M. Exactly.

D. O. Well, it's bound to seem stupid to you. With only forty-eight hours' leave from the front, to want to spend my one night at home like this?

O. M. I should say interesting rather than stupid.

D. O. Well. It's what I came over for. And I'd have done it too if you hadn't bagged the room. You see, I always dine here.

O. M. Alone?

D. O. Alone. I was furious when you wouldn't give it up. I'm afraid I was abominably rude into the bargain.

O. M. You certainly seemed to regard it as a matter of some importance. I'm not usually so curious . . . but . . .

D. O. Oh, I don't mind telling you. As a matter of fact, I'm rather glad. It'll do me good to get it off my chest. Strange . . . our meeting like this. Good job for me your guest failed you.

O. M. [*Laughing*] My guest? That was a little subterfuge to induce you to accept my invitation more

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readily. I was only too glad of your company. Otherwise, *I* should have feasted in solitude.

D. O. Really. Well, I hope you don't regret it. It's hell being lonely, isn't it?

O. M. [*After a pause*] It is, just that. Hell.

D. O. Are you alone much?

O. M. Always.

D. O. Then you'll understand my story. My people are all dead, so I've been pretty much alone, and, altogether I've had rather a rotten time. I've a natural desire for companionship, and this has brought me a few friends, chiefly among women. Finally, however, I was led into a . . . well . . . an intimacy that I mistook for love. It's taken me seven years to find out the difference between love and passion.

O. M. You're lucky to have found it out at all.

D. O. I suppose I am. Seven years ago tonight I sat here in this very room, with . . . the name doesn't matter. I'd been more than merely in love with her for months. But I wasn't satisfied. I wanted to marry her. I was mad to possess her utterly . . . to keep her for myself . . . always. So . . . I proposed. She turned me down . . . flat. I'd been deceiving myself all along. It served me right. I daresay lots of women would say I treated them the same. But now the tables were turned. I was hurt—hurt more than I thought possible. She'd simple been playing at love . . for the sake of the dinners . . the dances . . and all the rest of it. Love? She didn't know the first thing about that. You should have heard her laugh. Oh, it's ancient history. It sounds ridiculous to an old hand like you. But I was a youngster then and those things hurt . . Instead of trying to forget, I let it rankle. As a sop to my silly sentiment I made a vow. That wretched dinner and its memories become an annual affair. Once every year on that same day

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I've come back here to dine . . . alone with the phantom of the girl who gave me everything but love. I've kept my vow for seven years. Tonight is the seventh time. And it's the last.

O. M. The last?

D. O. Yes. The last. I'm cured. I couldn't have told you. I couldn't have sat with you and shared your meal . . . if I cared any more.

O. M. You must have been hard hit. I suppose you had some sort of an idea that she'd turn up again one of these nights, eh?

D. O. I hardly know what I expected. I do know that I worked myself into a chronic state of self pity that gave me a lot of morbid pleasure. And it lasted, mind you. Right up to this morning when I landed. Somehow I've felt different since I've seen Old England again.

O. M. Everyone feels some sort of change, I suppose.

D. O. We're all less petty and selfish, for one thing. The war's responsible for that much good, anyway.

O. M. Out of evil, you know.

[*The searchlight's flash. The* WAITER *enters with liqueur glasses and bottle.*]

Ah, here we are.

D. O. [*To* WAITER] Any excitement tonight?

WAITER. [*Busy at table*] Not yet, sir. They're on the lookout, though. Doesn't do to take any chances.

D. O. By Jingo, I would like to see them get a "Zep." Damn good fun, what?

WAITER. Yes, sir. These 'ere Zepperlines are very entertainin' . . . very. Sorry you can't have more light in 'ere. 'Gainst the regulations. Very strict now, sir.

D. O. Well, here's hoping . . . [*They drink.*] By Jove, that's great stuff. I must get some of this.

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O. M. Glad you like it.

[*The sound of guns is repeated.*]

D. O. Surely that's guns this time?

O. M. Shall we go to the balcony?

D. O. Might as well have a look out, yes.

O. M. [*To* WAITER] Open the windows.

WAITER. But the light, sir?

O. M. Light be damned. Be quick about it.

[*The* WAITER *opens the windows wide. The men rise.*]

D. O. [*Going up stage*] When was the last raid?

WAITER. The thirteenth, sir.

D. O. Thirteenth, eh? No wonder they got a drubbing. [*He steps on to the balcony. The flashes cease.*]

O. M. [*Centre*] See anything?

D. O. Not a single solitary speck.

O. M. Must have been a false alarm.

D. O. You come and have a look.

[*The* O. M. *steps out. Immediately flashes are renewed. The* WAITER, *grinning, comes down to table, pours himself a drink and swallows it. The flashes gradually cease. The men re-enter.*]

WAITER. Shall I close the windows, sir?

O. M. [*Sitting*] No. Leave them as they are. Fill up again and bring me the bill.

D. O. [*Sitting reluctantly*] By Gad, I'd like to see those anti-aircraft guns in action.

O. M. You haven't missed much.

[*The* WAITER *presents the bill.*]

D. O. I say, you must let me split this.

O. M. [*Paying with notes*] Not at all. You accepted my invitation, remember. [*To* WAITER] Will that cover it?

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WAITER. Quite, sir.

O. M. You can keep the change.

WAITER. Thank you, sir.

O. M. You needn't wait any longer. We'll probably be gone by ten. [*To* D. O.] Does that suit you? [*The* D. O. *nods.*] Right. Come back then.

D. O. [*Giving* WAITER *a coin*] Shan't see you again, then. Hope you'll like your new job.

WAITER. Thank you, sir. Good luck to you, sir. [*He goes right.*] Good night, gentlemen.

[*Exit right.*]

D. O. Exit waiter. Enter munition maker. It's remarkable how these fellows adapt themselves to conditions. [*Drinks.*]

O. M. Man is an adaptable animal. Not the habit-bound creature people would have us believe. The war is proving that.

D. O. It certainly is. [*He drains his glass, rises, and pushing back his chair, crosses to the fire-place.*] By Jove, that's the most extraordinary drink.

O. M. You must let me send you a bottle.

D. O. It's awfully good of you. I should like very much to know where one can buy it. I could hardly accept . . .

O. M. [*Interrupting*] Nonsense.

D. O. Really, sir, our acquaintance is so slight.

[*The fire-light shines directly on the* O. M.'s *face. Throughout the remainder of the scene he plays in this red spot-light.*]

O. M. A flimsy excuse, my dear Captain. Come, the days of convention are over. Life is too short.

D. O. Of course, if you insist.

O. M. I do. You must cultivate this adaptability of which we were speaking. It was given us for a

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purpose. Don't repress your generous feelings . . . encourage them.

D. O. You're right. It is a fault of mine. You're the first man I've ever really opened up with. It isn't difficult, somehow, with you. You're a true Bohemian. It isn't natural with me. Bohemians are born, not made.

O. M. And yet I acted like an old-fashioned conventionalist just now. I had the temerity to pry into your affairs.

D. O. Only after I had unnecessarily provoked your curiosity. [*He paces to and fro.*] I think you're right about convention. Religion'll be the next to go, I suppose.

O. M. Religion?

D. O. I believe so.

O. M. Do you mean to infer that religion will cease to exist?

D. O. Perhaps I should have said "change." I believe that religion is about to undergo a very material change.

O. M. In theory, or in practise?

D. O. In practise . . . chiefly.

O. M. And do you expect this great change to affect all religions, or your own in particular?

D. O. I'm afraid I hadn't thought out the matter so deeply. I had reference to Christianity. I really haven't a religion of my own.

O. M. Christianity? Yes, Christianity will change.

D. O. I was foolish enough to forget that Christianity is only one of many religions.

O. M. The mistake is common. Nowhere is egoism more colossal, nowhere will you find ignorance more rife than among our friends the theologians. [*There is a moment's silence.*] So you have no leanings toward any particular doctrine?

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D. O. Not at present.

O. M. But you must have some belief?

D. O. Of a kind . . . yes. Negative rather than positive.

O. M. May I ask you to be more explicit?

D. O. Well, I'm a sort of a modern doubting Thomas. I want to be sure. I want to know.

O. M. One never knows . . . till it's too late.

D. O. That's just it. It's the uncertainty of life that worries me. It's just that which makes things so hellish . . . out there. Some fellows never seem to think about anything. Take a night attack. I tell you the suspense is unbearable. We don't so much mind the actual fighting. It's not that which drives men mad. It's the waiting . . . the damned waiting . . . Well, it's something like that with religion . . only of course not so keen. I've too much imagination . . . I lack the simple faith necessary to help me over the bad places.

O. M. Faith? In what?

D. O. Oh . . . the Bible . . . miracles . . . all that sort of thing.

O. M. Few persons nowadays take the Bible literally.

D. O. Few? How about the "angels at Mons"?

O. M. Press stuff.

D. O. Precisely. Press stuff. Same in the Bible. All this miracle business is rot . . .tommy-rot, with a capital R. [*He pours himself another drink.*] I believe that it can all be scientifically explained in a perfectly practical manner. What can't be so explained is purely metaphorical.

O. M. You're getting into deep water. How far does this dis-belief carry you? [*After a pause*] What *do* you believe in?

D. O. I believe in a supreme being.

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O. M. Well, that's something to start from. Now . . . you've studied Christianity . . . tell me . . . do you believe in Christ?

D. O. As a man . . . yes.

O. M. But you deny His divinity?

D. O. I won't say I deny it. I simply can't credit it.

O. M. Nevertheless a devout Christian will tell you that the whole fabric of his religion stands or falls on that very question.

D. O. That's precisely my difficulty.

O. M. You're in a bad way. [*Suddenly and accusatively*] How about the personality of the Devil? Do you deny that?

D. O. Eh? Oh, of course that's ridiculous . . . utterly ridiculous.

O. M. You think so?

D. O. Why, of course. No sane person believes in the Devil . . . the cloven hoof . . . hell . . . and all that tosh.

O. M. [*Sardonically*] No?

D. O. You don't mean to say you do? [*He comes to the table.*] Look here. Never mind me. What's your notion of these things? I should imagine you'd be the sort of chap to have rather original ideas on such matters.

O. M. [*Laughing*] Original? I believe in everything.

D. O. [*Taking another drink*] What?

O. M. Perhaps I'd better put it in this way. I disbelieve nothing until positive proof is forthcoming, one way or another.

D. O. Are you sincere?

O. M. Absolutely. That indeed is the key to the whole question—Sincerity. The sincerity of the individual. Every man who is thoroughly sincere, no

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matter what his belief, is right . . . in the eyes of his Maker.

D. O. That's a tremendous statement.

O. M. I stake everything upon it.

D. O. By gad, that certainly opens up the way for me. [*He carries his drink to the fire.*]

O. M. To resume my argument. The personality of the Devil. If a man sincerely believes in the existence of the Devil . . . in the flesh . . . then . . . for that man, the Devil does exist . . . in the flesh.

D. O. For that man? Not for everybody?

O. M. It depends entirely on the state of one's mind. I should say, however, that Satan exists for everybody . . . with imagination.

D. O. Imagination? Is that all? No, I can't swallow that.

O. M. It does seem a little hard, I admit.

D. O. You don't mean to say you *have* swallowed it?

O. M. Why not?

D. O. But it's incredible! There's no argument in the world that would convince me.

O. M. Sit down, while I tell you something.

[*The* D. O. *sits left of table, not interfering with the red spot on the* O. M.'s *face.*]

It all comes back to the same question of adaptability; only in this instance it was more mental than physical. Two years ago I was in Central Africa, and there I met a man who was dying from the bite of a fly.

D. O. Tsetse?

O. M. Precisely. The tsetse fly. He was an Englishman . . . a Government surveyor. A thoroughly practical, sane man—the typical clean-living, sober civil engineer. Yet this man was positive that the Devil existed, not only in human form, but also in the shape of a fly.

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D. O. He must have been mad. Was that after the tsetse bit him?

O. M. I believe so. But his theory was so well thought out . . . the man so evidently sincere . . . that I for one could no longer doubt the truth of his statement.

D. O. What was it?

O. M. Are you sure you want to hear it? It's a gruesome enough tale.

D. O. Go ahead. I've been in the trenches, you know.

O. M. Let's have a drink, first.

D. O. I won't go so far as to despise a stimulant.

[*The* O. M. *fills the glasses, and they drink. The liquor is beginning to tell on* D. O.]

O. M. The engineer's name was Johnson. He wasn't what you'd call a religious chap, by any means, but, although he hadn't read his Bible for years, he remembered that Satan was called Beelzebub . . . or Prince of Flies.

D. O. Prince of Flies?

O. M. Prince of Flies. Well after his experience with the tsetse, an idea began to develop in his brain until he became obsessed with the notion that the Devil actually existed in the shape of a gigantic fly.

D. O. The result of the disease, of course. Did he see this mammoth insect?

O. M. That brings me to his story. It seems that one night he was roused from sleep by the sound of a steady and persistent buzzing. It came nearer . . . nearer . . . sinking slowly to a drone, and stopping close to his side. Gradually he became aware of two huge green eyes staring at him from the darkness, and presently he made out the complete body of an

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enormous fly. He was too horrified to breathe at first, but soon he managed to gain control of himself. The fly itself seemed to be trying to re-assure him. He began to understand its buzzings. It was calling to the creature that had bitten him, commanding it to appear before its Master. Then Johnson realized what it was. It was Beelzebub . . . the Prince of Flies. He was actually in the presence of the Arch Fiend Himself.

D. O. Good Heavens. What then?

O. M. The Devil spoke to him. From what Johnson told me they must have had quite a long conversation.

D. O. Poor wretch! Delirious, of course. What did the Devil say?

O. M. It seems that God has set the Devil-fly an endless task. He must consume every member of his race. Until this fly has eaten all its fellows, it cannot *permanently* retain its human shape.

D. O. Eat all the flies. Ugh. The Devil does exist as a man then?

O. M. So Johnson said. But that wasn't all. The whimsical part is to come. Each wretched victim, whether common house-fly, loathesome blue-bottle, or deadly tsetse, has to recite its miserable history into the ears of the waiting monster. Think what torture that must be for Satan . . . once the highest of the angels . . . proud Lucifer . . . the Prince of Darkness . . . condemned to assume the form of that most filthy of insects . . . the fly! To be called Prince of Flies. And, as if his brain were not already overburdened with the sins of humanity . . . to be compelled to listen to the nauseating tales of these buzzing scavengers. Finally . . . to eat them. Poor helpless cannibal. Can you imagine a more exquisite form of punishment?

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D. O. It is a bit thick, isn't it? Neither you nor Johnson lacks imagination. Ugh! Horrible! [*He drinks again. The searchlights flash.*] His Satanic Majesty would hear some rummy tales, what? Wonder what the tsetse told him?

O. M. Or the poisonous flies that laid their eggs in the mouths and nostrils of the convicts at Cayenne? God! What a story!

D. O. [*starting*] What's that?

O. M. A moth, I expect.

The D. O. *goes up to the curtains and shakes them.*

D. O. Ugh. Beastly things . . . moths.

O. M. Not so bad as flies.

D. O. [*coming back to his chair*] I've read somewhere that moths are the souls of wronged women.

O. M. [*with a sardonic laugh*] Who's being imaginative, now?

D. O. [*sitting*] This beastly fly business has got on my nerves.

O. M. Have another drink?

He pours him the last drop. The searchlights flash.

D. O. [*after draining glass*] We have flies in the trenches, you know. Look, there's one now.

A fly settles on the cloth. Throughout the whole of his speech, the O. M. *makes it evident that the insect is telling him the story.*]

O. M. So there is. A war fly, too! Listen to his story. This little fly has come from the trenches. Perhaps he crossed this morning on the very same boat as you. He was born in that little farmhouse you know so well, that lies just behind the lines. The rest house . . . you remember?

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D. O. [*Dazedly*] What do you know about it?

O. M. It's only a story. Happy little fly . . . so near and yet so far from the horrors of war; secure in the nice, cool kitchen, where la belle Marguerite churned the milk into butter . . . while Jacques, her soldier sweetheart, sat beside. Smoking his little cigarette, and talking of the future . . . the glorious future . . . for they were to be wed, when the cruel war was over. Brave Jacques . . . lucky Jacques, to be fighting so near his pretty sweetheart. And the fly buzzed merrily as they flirted so harmlessly. For, while Jacques sipped the honey of Marguerite's lips, my little fly lit on her beautiful round arm and crawled up to the frothy white ring made by the curdling butter-milk as she churned it in the tub. What a pretty story he would have to tell his Master, Beelzebub, when the time came for him to die. The Prince of Flies would smack his lips as he devoured him . . . sweet with the taste of the fresh, cool buttermilk.

D. O. [*Drunkenly*] Good. Good.

O. M. So, when, only last Sunday, our gallant Jacques returned to the firing-line; our little fly went with him, for company. Alas, pauvre Marguerite. If only she could have gone too. Ah, how cruel is war! How she wished then that she were a fly, to sit in the cap of her brave soldier-boy. So our little fly took pity on her and promised to come back to her kitchen every morning to tell her how things fared with Jacques. Behold then, next morning, very early, back he came! Buzzing gaily round the kitchen, and Marguerite . . . sang . . . for the news he brought was good. Jacques was safe . . . Jacques was well. More than that, Jacques had shot two Germans, and captured a third at the risk of his life. How proud she was! Was he not a hero? Was he not to receive a decoration,

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for gallantry? Good news indeed. And away buzzed my little fly, back to the trenches . . . bearing the honey from the warm, moist lips of la belle Marguerite . . . to the fevered mouth of her soldier-lover.

D. O. You're a regular poet!

O. M. *Softly!* I must hear all he says. Do not disturb my little fly. But, yesterday, this fly . . . this war fly, came staggering blindly into the kitchen, and hung, dripping, over the butter-tub. He buzzed so feebly that Marguerite thought some accident had befallen him on the way. Surely his wings were damaged? She drew closer to see. His long, thin little legs were sticking to his body, which was dripping . . . dripping . . . slow, thick, red drops of . . . blood . . . blood . . . my fly . . . red with blood . . . drunk with blood. Saturated . . . sated . . . with it, and red . . . redder than the fires of hell. And Marguerite trembled and said: "Little fly, if indeed you *are* my little fly, how is my Jacques today?" And the fly chuckled, horribly, thickly: "Jacques . . . your Jacques? He is no more . . . your Jacques." "But," said Marguerite, "I do not understand. What have you done with him? And why are you so red?" And my little fly laughed again as he answered: "Red? . . . red? . . . I am red with blood; the blood of what was once your brave . . . your gallant Jacques. Early this morning as you rubbed your sleepy eyes, a great big fly came humming through the air . . . and Jacques . . . poor fool . . . tried to stop it. Bah, he could not stop this fly. Z-u-u-u . . . tt! He fell . . . some of him . . . and lay there; all blood and brain. Squashed . . . on the rotten corpses of his comrades . . . squashed as I have seen him squash my brothers and sisters . . . many a time. And then . . . then I knew what it was that I had waited for so long. It was blood . . . not cool insipid buttermilk

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. . . but red, warm, salt and pungent blood. My Master Beelzebub will smile as I tell him of this . . . no sickly tale of sentiment, but one of war . . . of red . . . red war! I am no longer a common house-fly . . . I am a war-fly . . . and war-flies feed on blood. Fresh blood . . . stale blood . . . fresh flesh . . . putrefying flesh . . . any flesh . . . so it be flesh of man. Ah, what a tale for my master! I am a war fly! . . . a war fly!! . . . a WAR FLY!!!

[*The* D. O. *smashes his hand down on the fly, killing it. The* O. M. *leans back in his chair, sighing relievedly.*]

D. O. [*Rising, aghast*] Who are you? What are you?

O. M. [*Picking up fly and dropping it into his finger-bowl*] One tale less for the Devil to hear.

[*The* D. O. *watches, fascinated. The* O. M. *raises the bowl in his hands. The fire-light turns the water into blood. The bowl reaches his lips. All the lights go out. There is heard in the far distance a humming, buzzing sound. It grows louder. The searchlights begin to flash. There is a sound of guns. The searchlights concentrate on one spot. The buzzing becomes terrific in volume. The searchlights flicker. The buzzing and the guns grow fainter. The lights go up. The* O. M. *has disappeared. The* D. O. *sobered, leans over and picks up the finger-bowl. The sounds cease. The bowl is empty. He slowly places it on the table. The search-lights cease. There is a dead silence. The* D. O.'s *teeth chatter. He is unable to move anything, but his eyes. Suddenly these fix themselves on the door-knob. He moves*

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slightly in that direction. One feels that he dare not look behind. Slowly, noiselessly, he creeps to the door. As his hand touches the knob, he gives a slight gasp of relief. His hands, wet with the sweat of fear, slip on the handle. At last the door gives, and he staggers out, leaving it open behind him. The searchlights flash.]

THE CURTAIN FALLS

NOTE TO STAGE DIRECTORS—*It is of great importance that the actor playing the role of the O. M. should not be seen by the audience after the black-out. If, however, circumstances demand that he should take a curtain call, it is still more important that he should enter for that purpose from the door right and from no other part of the stage. The violation of the first rule will mitigate largely against the mystical effect of the play; but the violation of the second will absolutely destroy any such effect, and must, at all costs, be avoided.*

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FOR KING AND COUNTRY

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CHARACTERS

JOHN FOSTER, *a village grocer.*
MARY FOSTER, *his wife.*
JACK, HARRY, } *their sons.*
LAURA WEST, *a neighbor's daughter.*

Time: The present.

Scene: The living room of JOHN FOSTER'S *shop in the village of Thirlmere, England.*

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FOR KING AND COUNTRY

The scene is the living-room adjoining the shop of JOHN FOSTER, *grocer, in the village of Thirlmere, England. It is seven o'clock in the evening of a warm day in the latter part of May,* 1915. *The room is in semi-darkness. Down to the right is the fireplace, and on its red-covered mantelpiece stands a small oil lamp, with a tin shade, throwing a feeble light half-way across the room. An open door up to the right leads to the kitchen, from which a faint light issues. A slightly stronger and more ruddy glow comes from the door opposite [up to the left] leading to the shop, which is now lit by the setting sun. There are no windows visible, the remaining light coming from the foots, which are checked low. The floor is covered with a good but ancient carpet of indistinguishable pattern. The ceiling is low, with two broad beams worn and worm-eaten, projecting some twelve inches below the cracked plaster, and stretching from wall to wall, lengthwise to the audience. The walls are papered with a faded rose pattern from floor to ceiling, without picture-rail or frieze. A rag rug covers the hearth, and around the grate is a brass fender furnished with brass-handled fire-irons. The grate is hidden by a small screen. The mantelpiece holds, in addition to the lamp above mentioned, an*

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ornamental china clock, a match-stand, two large sea shells, and one or two small photographs. Over the clock hangs a large picture of the family, at either side of which are two illuminated texts, bearing the inscriptions, "GOD IS OUR REFUGE AND STRENGTH," and "GOD IS LOVE." A chair stands down to the right against the wall, and above it is a large portrait of Queen Victoria. A calender hangs at one side of the fireplace, and above the door up right is a stuffed weasel in a glass case. Another chair stands in the corner against the back wall, and next to it is a plain but handsome sideboard, plentifully stocked with old blue china; then another chair, a grandfather clock, and finally, a door leading, presumably, to the bedrooms above. Over these two chairs are two war posters of somewhat lurid design. One bears the words "Your King and country need you" and the picture of a brilliantly uniformed and dashing figure on a restive steed. The other is a design of a more sombre and less fictitious nature. It depicts a stricken soldier lying in a wrecked cathedral, his eyes riveted to the figure on the Cross, miraculously uninjured. A blue china stand filled with bullrushes is in the corner up left, and just below this a door, opening outwards, leads to the shop. Above the door is a stuffed owl. Against the wall to the centre is a wicker work-table on which are photo and picture post-card albums. The family Bible occupies the shelf below. On the wall above is a fine old sampler, and down left stands an upholstered couch with beaded cushions. A large framed portrait of Mr. Gladstone and a print of King George V. occupy prominent positions, while pictures of Kitchener,

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Joffre, etc., cut from newspapers, adorn other parts of the walls, and the sides of the dresser. In the centre of the room is a round mahogany three-legged table covered with a dull red cloth. In its centre is a mat and upon this rests a large bowl of white lilac. An armchair stands right centre, and two horse-hair chairs are set one on each side of the table.

At the rise of the curtain MARY FOSTER *is discovered, seated in the armchair right centre She is a white-haired old lady of some seventy years. She wears an old black dress. Around her shoulders is wrapped a white woolen shawl. Upon her head is a little lace cap and her feet are encased in white felt slippers. She wears spectacles and shows evidences of failing sight. She is carefully knitting away at a thick gray muffler, and now and again fumbles with a dropped stitch. She sighs, and, placing her work in her lap, proceeds to wipe her tired eyes and to polish her spectacles. This done, she resumes her work just as her husband,* JOHN FOSTER, *enters up right from the kitchen. He is a tall, handsome, old man between seventy and eighty years of age, very hale, but grave with the weight of his years. and the sadness of the times. His face is stern and deeply lined. The mouth is firmly set, but the eyes are kind and wrinkled with the laughter of happier years. His hair is white and fluffy with a large bald spot in the centre. He is clean-shaven, but on his chin and upper lip is a white and bristly growth indicating the near approach of the weekly rite. He is in his shirt sleeves, and his open vest exposes the front of his gray flannel shirt. The vest is completely unbuttoned, but linked by a massive gold watch chain. His spectacles pro-*

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trude from an upper pocket. His trousers are old and baggy at the knees. His feet are shod with thick gray socks and carpet slippers. An unlit pipe is in his mouth, and he carries in his hands a large oil lamp, lit, which he proceeds to place in the centre of the table.

JOHN. There, I reckon as how that'll be a bit better for you, Mary... [*He takes the bowl of lilac and places it in the centre of the sideboard.*]

MARY. Thank you, John. [*She knits a few stitches.*] Yes, it's much better, now.

[JOHN *feels in his vest pockets for a match, and, failing to find one, crosses to the mantelpiece and takes a handful from the box, placing them in his pockets.*]

JOHN. [*Looking over her shoulder*] You shouldn't try your eyes so, Mary. I'm sure you must be tired. [*Comes right centre.*] Why don't you rest awhile? [*Strikes match and tries to light pipe.*]

MARY. I want to finish it in time for Harry's birthday. It's little we can do for our baby, John, but maybe it'll mean a lot to him.

JOHN. [*Picking up the end of the muffler and examining it*] Yes, I reckon it will. [*He sits right centre by the table and strikes another match.*] What . . . what is it you're making him, Mother?

MARY. [*Smiling*] It's to go round his neck. Jack says it's terrible cold in those trenches, especially at night.

JOHN. [*Puffing at his pipe*] It must be. Terrible cold. Jack ought to know, poor lad. Thank God *he'll* never see a trench again.

MARY. How has he been today, Father?

JOHN. Jack? Well, he's too quiet to please me. He's takin' things mighty hard, mighty hard.

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MARY. He always did, poor boy, though lots of folks think that he isn't a bit sensitive. He's very brave about it, John. It's a terrible affliction. I can't realize that he'll never be able to see anything again. Blind! Oh, John! It must be awful to be blind! *My* old eyes are getting a bit dim. That seems hard enough What must it be for him?

JOHN. [*Rising and going up centre*] Aye, it's a bad business . . . a bad business! We must just trust in the Lord. He has never failed us yet, Mother, remember that. [*He turns to the centre poster.*] For King and Country! Well, he lost his sight in a good cause, a just and righteous cause. [*Turns to the other poster.*] He might have lost his *life*, too, for his King and Country . . . for his God. [*He turns and comes above table centre.*] I tell you I'm proud of him. Our boy, Mary. My son! I only wish *I* could have done the same.

[*His pipe has gone out. He stuffs it into one trousers pocket, and from the other pulls out a red handkerchief. He sits right centre and blows his nose vigorously.*]

MARY. I'm proud of our boys too. But it does seem a dreadful waste, a dreadful waste. If . . . if anything should happen to Harry . . . I think my heart would break.

JOHN. [*Rising and bending over her*] There, there, we won't borrow trouble. The lad is in God's hands, like the rest of us. His will be done. [*He pats her shoulder.*]

MARY. [*Placing her hand on his*] His will be done.

JOHN. [*Moving up centre*] Well, I must see how Jack's getting along, Mother. He'll be takin' the shop off my hands yet.

MARY. You might step outside and see if there's

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any sign of the postman. Maybe there's a letter from Harry.

JOHN. [*At door*] I will. Maybe there is.

[*Exit left.*]

[*After a moment's pause* MARY *resumes her knitting. Presently the shop bell rings, indicating that* JOHN *is looking for the postman. At the same instant a military band is heard in the distance. It is playing "Tipperary." After a few bars* MARY *begins to cry silently. Her hands droop to her lap and the tears roll down her cheeks. As the band finishes the chorus she dries her eyes, and begins once more to knit. The chorus is repeated, the shop door closes with a bang and a clatter of the bell. The music ceases. Re-enter* JOHN *left. He has his coat on one arm and a newspaper in his hand.*]

JOHN. [*Coming left of table*] Did you hear that?

MARY. Yes. What band is it?

JOHN. [*He places the paper on the table, puts on his coat, sits left and unfolds the newspaper.*] It's come over from Bullford Camp for the meeting tonight. The big recruiting meeting. They want Jack to speak. I asked him just now if he was going, but he said 'No.'

Mary. I'm glad he isn't. It might upset him again.

JOHN. Well, he'd be all right if it weren't for them busy bodies hanging around the shop. Gossipy old men and women who ain't got nothin' better to do but talk. Come in for a ha'porth o' baccy and stay for two or three hours, tellin' *him* about the war, pumpin' him for all they're worth till the poor boy nearly goes off his head! Why, he'd half promised to speak at the meetin'. Those tit-tatlers hadn't got at

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him then. They're like flies around a piece of meat. No wonder he's upset! It's more than the lad can stand after what he's been through. [*He scans the paper and shakes his head.*]..I doubt the lad won't go, and I can't blame him.

MARY. I wish he hadn't promised. What does the paper say? Anything about our Jack?

JOHN. First of all, there's a lot of big type. [*Reads*] "Your King and Country need you. Join the colors now. Cowards wait for conscription. Be a Man. Enlist tonight and become a hero. God Save the King!"

MARY. Is that all?

JOHN. Wait a bit. [*Reads*] "A grand recruiting meeting will be held tonight (Saturday) on the village green at 7.30 P. M. The band of the 21st Prov. Battalion will be in attendance and it is devoutly to be hoped that those men amongst us who have so far refrained, for whatsoever reason, from joining His Majesty's Forces will avail themselves of this opportunity to do so. Let us remember the words of Nelson, 'One volunteer is worth one hundred pressed men.' Major Tompkins will address the meeting, and our illustrious townsman, the heroic Corporal John Foster, the elder son of a worthy local tradesman, has promised to shake the hand of every new recruit." Well, they'll be mighty disappointed if Jack doesn't go over. I'll have to read him this. It might make him change his mind.

MARY. Read it to me again, will you, John?

John. What, all of it?

MARY. No, just that bit about Jack.

JOHN. [*Reading*] "Our illustrious townsman, the heroic Corporal John Foster, the elder son of a worthy local tradesman" . . . meaning me, Mary . . . "has promised to shake the hand of every new recruit."

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MARY. Illustrious townsman! Well, maybe there won't *be* any recruits.

[*The shop bell rings off left.*]

JOHN. "Cowards wait for conscription." Well, Mary, we've nothing to reproach *ourselves* with. Our boys went willingly enough.

MARY. Yes, dear. But look how they come back. Jack is blind, and Harry . . .

JOHN. Yes, Harry may be dead for all we know. [*Takes a postcard from his pocket and reads it.*] "Somewhere in France" . . . Somewhere in France. "I am well." [*Pause*] "Received the socks you sent me." [*Pause.*] "Love from Harry." [*Replaces it in his pocket.*]

MARY. That's the only word from him for over three weeks.

JOHN. [*Reading paper*] "Your King and Country need you. Enlist tonight and become a hero." . . . a hero!

[*Enter* JACK *left. He is a tall, well-built man of forty years, but looking considerably older. He is clad in civilian clothes with the exception of his jacket, which is of military cut, bearing his corporal's stripe. He is totally blind, one eye being missing and the other half closed. He face is heavily marked by gunpowder. He stoops slightly and carries a stick in his right hand.*]

JACK. Dad, do you mind coming into the shop a minute? Mrs. Dawson wants a penn'orth of margarine, and I can't quite manage the scales.

JOHN. [*Rising and leaving paper on table*] Just thinking it was time you had a rest, Jack, though business isn't exactly brisk. You stay here and talk to Mother for a bit.

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[JACK *moves centre.* JOHN *goes to door, turns, shakes his head sadly and exits left.*]

JACK. [*Coming down right centre*] Don't you move, Mother. I can find the way. It gets easier every time now. [*He sits right centre.*] Still knitting the muffler?

MARY. Yes, dear.

JACK. I can hear the needles. Wonderful how sharp my ears are getting. Didn't I hear Dad reading about the meeting tonight?

MARY. Yes, dear. Are you going?

JACK. I don't know. I might. Laura offered to walk over with me.

MARY. Laura? That was nice of her.

JACK. She went by this morning with the baby. She let me hold the little chap. Spoke about the meetin'. Said she'd look in some time this evenin'.

Mary. I'll be glad to see her. Are you goin' to the meetin' Jack?

JACK. I don't know. I half promised to, but I'd get out of it if I could.

MARY. The paper says that they're expecting you. [*He makes no sign.*] It's there by your side. [*He takes the paper and holds it in his hands.*] Shall I read what it says, dear?

JACK. No, thank you, Mother. I don't think I'll go.

MARY. But, Jackie . . . it says you *did* promise. It says you promised to shake the hand of every new recruit.

JACK. Does it? I never did. That settles it. I'm not going.

MARY. Why not, dear?

JACK. Well, do you think I'm an encouraging sight for a new recruit?

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[*There is a long silence.* MARY *gives a stifled sob. She rises, and, going to her son, draws his head to her breast.*]

There, Mother, you mustn't take on so. It can't be helped.

MARY. Oh, my boy! my boy! You're so brave and patient . . . so brave and patient. [*She goes back to her chair.*]

JACK. It's strange there's no more news of Harry.

MARY. Did the postman go by?

JACK. Yes, some time ago. He seems as anxious as we are. They all love young Harry, Mother . . . especially Laura.

MARY. Poor Laura! She's had a hard time.

JACK. She has. It's an awful position for a nice girl like her. It hasn't been easy for you either, Mother. You might have been so different.

MARY. I always try to help those in trouble, dear.

JACK. Ah, Mother, that doesn't deceive me.

MARY. I'm not trying to deceive you, my boy. I've always known that you loved Laura.

JACK. Yes, but you know that isn't what I mean. It's the baby. Oh! I've got to say what's in my mind. Dad's got to know too. Don't you understand? Supposing Harry were to come home now! The young fool's made a nice mess of things . . .

MARY. Don't, Jack. You frighten me. You wouldn't hurt Harry. He's so . . .

JACK. Good Lord, no. I shan't touch him. I'm not going to quarrel with my own brother. Laura loves him. He's won her right enough . . . leastways, I think so. I don't believe he ever meant to get her into trouble. No, we shan't quarrel over that. But he's got to marry her, that's the point, and if he says he won't, by God, I'll make him!

MARY. But your father . . . ?

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JACK. Dad'll be all right after he gets over the shock. He thinks a terrible lot of Harry. We'll find a chance to talk it over with Laura tonight. She must see how serious it'd be if Harry came home now . . . knowing nothing.

MARY. She'll do what's right now, Jack. She's a brave girl. I've always loved her, and I'll be proud to have her for a daughter. It's a pity she couldn't have loved you.

JACK. That's what *I* thought once. But I was wrong. Look at me now. Oh! I'm not as brave and patient as you think. But it's my punishment. When I found that Laura loved Harry and wouldn't look at me, I cursed him. Yes, left home cursing him, in my heart. I cursed him all the time I was away. Even when the shell burst in my face I cursed him. But, when I awoke in the hospital and they told me that I should never see her again . . . then I knew the truth. Laura was never made for me . . . Laura couldn't marry a blind man. But I haven't mastered myself *yet*. I can't help hating him still; though, please God, he'll never know it. He's always been the lucky one. He'll come home safe and sound to his sweetheart . . . and his son. His son! Oh, I know they're not married yet. But it's a war-baby. That's no disgrace, nowadays. Besides, he loves her. But not as *I* would have loved her. I may be a bit old, but if I hadn't been blind, I'd have made her a better husband . . . by God, I would!

[*His hands grip his knees in the effort to control himself. He has torn the paper across. His mother goes to him, and places it on the table beyond his reach.*]

MARY. My poor lamb . . . my own dear boy!

JACK. I'm sorry, Mother. I just *had* to say it.

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I've had an awful day in the shop. People kept asking me questions . . . about the war . . . what I saw . . how men look when they're hit . . was I afraid? Was I afraid! My God, was I afraid!! Why can't they leave me alone? I keep seeing things . . . dead men . . . horses . . . God, those horses . . . spouting blood. And the smell . . . Faugh . . . I can't get the taste out of my mouth, or the sound out of my ears . . . roaring . . . roaring! . . . roaring!! [*He covers his ears with his hands and groans aloud.*]

MARY. Don't, Jackie . . . don't.

JACK. If only I could sleep, Mother, I'd be better. The nights . . . the nights are awful. And now . . . now it's *always* night, except when I sit outside and feel the warm sun on my face . . . so warm . . . but then it gets hot . . . hot . . . and I think it's that shell bursting again . . . [*He flings his head forward on his hands and writhes, his elbows on his knees.*]

[*Enter* JOHN *left.*]

[MARY *signs to him to be mindful of* JACK.]

JOHN. A penn'orth o' margarine! I don't see how we're going to make ends meet. [*Coming left centre.*] How much do you think we've taken today? [*Sits left of table.*]

MARY. I don't know. A shilling?

JOHN. Sevenpence-ha'penny. That's three ha'-pence profit. Nine pence a week! We can't live on that.

MARY. You forget the boys' allowance, and Jack has saved quite a bit.

JOHN. We'll not touch a penny of it, Mary, not a penny. My savings must go first. The boys'll need theirs when the war's over. As for their allowances, they've earned them, God knows! No! We've got to cut down expenses again somehow. I reckon my old

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pipe'll have to go. [*Sees the paper.*] Or the paper . . . Why, it's all crumpled. Here, it's torn . . . right across the recruiting meeting.

JACK. I'm sorry, Dad. I must have done it unconsciously.

JOHN. [*Looking at* MARY *askance*] Never mind. I'll manage to read it.

MARY. [*After a glance at calendar*] John, do you know what today is?

JOHN. Day? Day? Why, the twenty-ninth of May. What of it?

MARY. The twenty-ninth of May is the Queen's birthday.

JOHN. Queen Victoria . . . God rest her soul! . . . so it is.

JACK. No, Mother, the twenty-ninth of May is oak-apple day. The *twenty-fourth* of May is the Queen's birthday.

MARY. Is it, Jack? Are you sure?

JOHN. I don't see what difference it makes.

JACK. This *is* oak-apple day, though, Dad. I remember the same day last year.

JOHN. [*Still reading paper*] Oh! How's that?

JACK. Why, that was when Laura West came to tea. [JOHN *puts down paper.*] Don't you remember? I was home on leave, and Harry had just got into his uniform. He tore himself on a thornbush the very first day.

JOHN. Jack, you talk a deal too much of that West girl. You too, Mother. I'm not usually a hard man, but it's no good you tryin' to get me to sympathize with her. She's done for herself wi' me . . . aye and wi' you too, Jack, I should think . . . if you've got any pride.

JACK. Dad!! . . .

JOHN. Now, I don't want to hurt anybody's feel-

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ings, but I think she's treated you and Harry very bad . . . very. Some young scapegrace has got the better of her. She's made a fool of herself. She could have had either of you lads if she'd kept herself decent. Oh, I don't mean she's never to come here again, Mother. She's welcome so long as she don't bother me. She needs someone to comfort her, and the both of you seem ready and willin'. But there's no occasion to overdo it. I'd rather not see so much of her, and I'll tell you why. I believe as how young Harry was fond of her . . . mighty fond. I know you were too, Jack, but she was more suited to Harry, and I used to think . . . But she's been an' done for herself . . . and it hurts me . . . it does that. What'll my boy think when he comes back to his sweetheart and finds her with a child? No! No matter *how* much she cries for sympathy she'll never get it from me. Never. No! Nor from Harry either. There'll be no bastards in *my* family, so help me God!

[*There is a long pause.*]

MARY. But, John, maybe it wasn't all her fault.

JOHN. Mary, you know better than that. You're a woman. I'm an old man, but I don't forget the time when I was young. That girl knew what she was doin', that I'll swear.

MARY. But supposin' she *loves* Harry.

JOHN. Then I'm sorry for her. It's too late. My boy shan't have second-hand goods.

MARY. But, John, he might be willing. This is a war baby.

JOHN. Is it? That makes it worse. A girl like Laura West, mixing with the crowd that hangs round an army camp! . . . Men she's never seen before!

MARY. John you don't know that.

JOHN. Well . . . can she tell me the man's name?

[*There is a dead silence.*]

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JACK. Dad, I reckon the country needs all the babies it can get. The rector was tellin' me last night . . .

JOHN. That's no excuse for a girl like Laura. The rector! . . . Bah! You'll have to quote a better authority than him to satisfy me.

MARY. Very well, John. The words of Our Lord Himself, "He that is without sin, let *him* cast the first stone."

[*Enter* LAURA *left.*]

[JOHN *rises angrily, thumping on the table.*]

JOHN. I tell you . . . [*Something in* MARY'*s face stops him. He turns and sees* LAURA *standing in the doorway.*]

MARY. Come in, Laura.

LAURA. [*Coming centre.*] [*She is a pretty, well-developed young woman of about twenty years, neatly and quietly dressed.*] I beg your pardon, Mr. Foster. I didn't think you'd be in. I came to take Jack to the meeting.

JOHN. Well, he's not goin'.

LAURA. Oh, I'm sorry. Then . . .

MARY. You must stay awhile and tell us all the news. Take your hat and jacket off, dear, and make yourself at home.

[LAURA *hesitates.* JOHN *goes to door left.*]

JACK. Don't go, Laura, please.

JOHN. Mary, I'm going out to get a breath of air and keep an eye on the shop.

JACK. [*Rising and changing to chair left of table*] Sit there, Laura . . . next to mother.

[LAURA *puts her hat and jacket on the chair up right.*]

LAURA [*Coming right centre*] I hope you're well, Mrs. Foster? [*Sits right centre.*]

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MARY. Yes, thank you, dear. There's no need to ask that question of you. How is the baby?

LAURA. Oh, he's wonderfully well . . . isn't he, Jack?

JACK. If weight's any sign of good health, he's in the very pink of condition.

MARY. We were just talking about you, Laura.

LAURA. Yes, I heard what you said. Thank you for taking my part. I'm sorry Mr. Foster doesn't like me any more.

MARY. He's not as hard as he seems, dear.

JACK. It's not an easy matter to discuss, but we've got to have it out. We know about Harry and you . . . you must have guessed that.

LAURA. Jack, please don't go on . . . Oh, Mrs. Foster! [*She hides her face in her hands.* MARY *draws the girl to her side.*] You don't think me a very wicked girl, do you?

MARY. My dear, you've been very foolish, but even the best of us is apt to make mistakes. I can't forget that your sin is fully shared by my boy Harry. I blame him as much as you.

JACK. We feel that Dad has got to know, too.

LAURA. Know what?

JACK. He'd better be told before Harry comes home.

LAURA. Is Harry coming home?

JACK. We haven't heard anything, but he might get his leave at any moment. You've got to think of getting married just as soon as ever he arrives.

LAURA. But what are you going to tell your father?

JACK. That you and Harry are to be married.

LAURA. [*Rising*] Isn't that why he's angry with me?

MARY. [*Rising to restrain her*] The baby, dear, the baby.

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LAURA. I'm not ashamed of the baby!

JACK. [*Rising*] You see, Laura, Dad doesn't know it's Harry's. He's not angry with *him* . . . yet.

LAURA. [*Gradually realising*] The baby—doesn't know—? Whose could it have been but Harry's? Oh! so that's why. [*Turning to* JACK] I thought he was angry because—

JACK. Because what?

LAURA. I thought he wanted me to marry *you*. [JACK *makes a hopeless gesture and slowly exits left.*] [*To* MARY] Why, I've never loved anyone but Harry. You knew that?

MARY. Yes, *I* knew it, dear, but they didn't. Men find it hard to understand some things.

LAURA. That's what I used to say to him. [*Changing her tone*] We didn't mean to do wrong.

MARY. I know, dear. You shall have your wedding just the same.

LAURA. And the baby? Can he be christened? I do so want him to be christened.

MARY. Of course, of course. I'll speak to the rector.

LAURA. Do you . . . do you think I might call him Harry?

MARY. You shan't call him anything *else*. Now you're not to worry. Just leave everything to me.

LAURA. Oh, you're so kind. I don't feel ashamed any more.

MARY. You have paid your price with much suffering. I wonder how Harry will pay.

LAURA. Surely he's suffering enough . . . out at the front?

MARY. You *have* told him, then?

LAURA. Oh, no! no! I *couldn't* tell him. I was afraid he'd be angry. I meant, his suffering as a soldier.

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MARY. That would have come to him in any case. It was his duty as a man. No, there will be some cross for him to bear.

LAURA. Oh, he couldn't be . . . you don't think he could *possibly* be blind?

MARY. Would you give him up if he were?

LAURA. It would be terrible! terrible!!

[*Enter* JOHN *up left followed by* JACK. LAURA *and* MARY *rise.* JOHN *comes left centre.* JACK *drops down left.*]

JOHN. Is this true? [MARY *backs right.* LAURA *advances right centre.*] Come here! [LAURA *goes to him.*] Laura West, you'll tell me the truth. [*He looks her full in the eye.*] Was it my boy Harry?

LAURA. [*Drawing herself up and returning his gaze fearlessly.*] Yes, Mr. Foster.

[JOHN *holds her eyes for a space before turning away. She stands motionless. He paces to and fro.*]

JOHN. My boy! My Harry! I wouldn't have believed it! You must give me time to get over this. It's come rather sudden.

MARY. Now, John, you mustn't get worked up.

JOHN. Be quiet, Mary. I've got to think this out for myself. [*He continues to pace the floor, then . .*] Ha! and ten minutes ago I swore there'd never be a bastard in our family. [*Down left centre.*] [*Turning suddenly on* LAURA] Do you love him?

LAURA. [*She comes down right centre, crossing to him.*] Yes, I do love him. [*She raises her arms in a magnificent gesture.*] Altogether.

JOHN. [*Looking at her steadfastly for a moment.*] Well, I'm glad o' that. It makes a deal o' difference. [LAURA *makes a movement toward him.*] No . . . not yet. It's hard for me to change. Mother, you

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know that. [MARY *holds her hands to* LAURA *who goes to her.*] I've got to think this out. [*He sits left of table.*] Why didn't you tell me afore?

MARY. [*Stroking* LAURA*'s hair*] It's best for some things to come slow, John.

JACK. We knew you'd be angry, Dad, but you mustn't forget Harry's share.

JOHN. That's it. That's just it! I've always *told* 'im. "Run straight," I said . . . "run straight!" He's weaker than you, Jack. We had a deal o' trouble wi' him when he was a little lad, but I never thought it'd 'ave come to this! Eh, it's a bad business. He'll be punished for it, you mark my words. God is just. Sin reaps its own reward . . always . . always . . Well, reproaches won't mend matters. He must marry you as soon as ever he comes home. You see that, don't you?

LAURA. I'm sure Harry will want to.

JOHN. Well, I'll see that he *does.* I've known him longer than you, my girl. Things are easier said than done wi' him. He was my favorite son, but he's disappointed me. He's not like Jack. Why couldn't you have fallen in love wi' *him*? He's a good lad is Jack, a good lad.

[LAURA *goes above table.*]

JACK. Father, you mustn't say anything against Harry. Laura loves him.

JOHN. I know, I know. Ah, it's a contrary world. I often think I'll be glad to leave it.

MARY. John!

JOHN. Well, what have we got for all our years of striving and praying. We've had four little ones, you and me, Mary. Two of 'em left us . . . years ago. Our firstborn 'as come back from the war . . . blind. And Harry, our baby, has brought shame and dis-

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honor to this young girl. Is it any wonder that I'll be glad to leave such a world? Is it any wonder . . .

MARY. [*Crossing and touching his arm*] John, you haven't forgotten me, have you?

JOHN. No, I've still got you, Mother. I've still got you. [*Leads her to armchair.*]

JACK. Dad, you leave this to me.

JOHN. How do you mean, leave it to you? [*Right centre.*]

JACK. I mean about the wedding. You see, it's hardly likely that Harry'll be home for more than a day or two. There won't be time to put up the banns. We'll have to have a special license.

JOHN. Eh! They're terrible expensive, I doubt. [*Sits right of table.*]

JACK. That's where my savings'll come in. You won't touch my allowance money, you say. Very well, all the more for a weddin' present. My present to you, Laura, is the special license.

LAURA. [*Left centre*] Oh, Jack, if only I could do something for *you.*

JACK. You can. Now you're goin' to be my sister, I'll claim a kiss.

[*She crosses to couch and kisses him...* JOHN *and* MARY *exchange a look of understanding.* LAURA *comes left centre.*]

JOHN. Laura, I've said some hard things about you and the baby, and all the time it's my own blood that's been to blame, my own son. I want you to forgive me.

LAURA. There's nothing to forgive, Mr. Foster.

JOHN. Thank you, my dear. I shan't forget that. Mother, I feel that we ought to thank the Lord for clearing up all this trouble. I'd like us all to join in a prayer . . . for our new-found daughter . . . and

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for our boy Harry . . . that he may be brought home to us safe and sound.

[MARY *and* JACK *bow their heads.* LAURA *kneels, resting her head on her arm on the back of the chair left centre.* JOHN *kneels right centre by the table.*]

O, Lord God of Israel, Thou Who art ever ready to help the afflicted, heal the sick, comfort the sorrowing, to bind up the broken heart. We humbly bow before Thee in praise and thanksgiving for lifting from our hearts a heavy burden. We bless Thee for Thy clemency. We glorify Thy wondrous Name. We know our infirmities, Lord, we are as clay in Thy hands. We beseech Thee to look with compassion upon this, Thy erring daughter, who has even now been received by us as a member of our earthly family. Heavenly Father, have pity on her, receive her earnest repentance for sins committed, and in Thy great compassion, receive her little one into Thy fold. May he grow up to be a good and faithful servant in Thy tabernacle. Make them both Thy children even as we have made them ours. And now, O Lord, we lift our voices in supplication to Thee, in behalf of our absent son . . . her dearly beloved . . . our baby boy Harry. Forgive this his great sin, we beseech Thee. Save him from the judgement. Spare him and preserve him from all the perils and dangers of this dreadful war. Grant unto him patience and endurance, strengthen his heart, and, dear Lord, bring him home to us speedily and in safety. Finally, we pray that Thou wilt bring us all, in Thy good time, into Thine Eternal Peace. We ask it for Thy dear Name's sake. Amen.

[*There is silence.* MARY *wipes her eyes and Jack raises his head.* LAURA *and* JOHN *remain kneeling. The shop bell rings harshly.*

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JOHN *rises to his feel.* LAURA *follows suit, and* JACK *reaches for his stick.*]

JOHN. All right, Jack. I'll go. [*Exit left.*]

[LAURA *goes up right for her hat and jacket.*]

MARY. You must stay and have supper with us, dear.

LAURA. Oh, may I?

MARY. Of course. Father will be pleased. Sit here while I lay the table. [*Rising.*]

LAURA. Oh, no, no. You must let *me* do it. I know where everything is.

MARY. Very well, dear, and thank you. [*Sits down again.*]

[LAURA *puts lamp on sideboard, removes red cloth and substitutes white tablecloth. Begins to lay for supper.*]

JACK. [*After a pause*] Quite like old times, eh, Laura?

LAURA. Yes, Jack.

MARY. [*After another pause*] Do you know what day it is?

LAURA. [*After making sure that the question is addressed to her*] Why, it's Saturday, isn't it?

JACK. Mother means the day of the month.

LAURA. [*Embarrassed*] The day of the month?

MARY. The twenty-ninth of May.

JACK. Oak-apple day.

[LAURA *drops a cup. It breaks.*]

Hello, what's that?

JOHN. [*Off stage*] Jack! Jack!!

LAURA. [*Relieved*] Mr. Foster's calling you, Jack.

JACK. [*Rising*] I'm coming, Dad. [*Goes up to door left.*] The twenty-ninth of May is oak-apple day. Don't you remember? . . . Last year? [*Exit left.*]

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[LAURA *picks up the cup and, replacing it on the table, bursts into tears.* MARY *rises and goes to her.*]

MARY. There, there, dearie. It's only an old cup. It doesn't matter.

[LAURA *continues to sob bitterly.* MARY *leads her down to armchair.*]

MARY. Why, Laura, you mustn't cry so. What is it?

LAURA. Oh, why did you remind me? Why?

MARY. Remind you? What, child? Come, tell Mother all about it. [*They embrace,* LAURA *gradually controlling herself*]

LAURA. Last year. Oak-apple day.

MARY. Yes, yes.

LAURA. That was when I came to tea.

MARY. Yes, darling. There's nothing to cry about in that.

LAURA. But there is, there is.

MARY. I don't understand. Come . . . come.

LAURA. That was [*sob*] . . . that was when . . . when . . . [*She hides her face on* MARY's *breast*]

MARY. There, there, dearie, it's all over now. Everything's going to be all right. Mother'll take care of you.

LAURA. And I was feeling so happy. Everything seems different now. I'm ashamed . . . ashamed. I don't suppose I'll *ever* be happy again.

[*Re-enter* JACK *left. He is greatly agitated. He closes the door carefully behind him.*]

JACK. Mother! Laura! I . . . I've something to . . . to tell you. [*The women move apart.* MARY *rises.*] Don't be afraid. You mustn't be alarmed.

LAURA. [*Rising*] What's the matter?

JACK. [*Coming left centre*] Why . . . you know

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when Dad went out just now . . . some one in the shop?

MARY. Well, who was it?

JACK. It's . . . it's two fellows from Harry's regiment.

MARY. He . . . he's not . . . not . . . ?

JACK. They've got him with them.

MARY and LAURA. [*In whisper*] Dead?

JACK. No . . . not dead.

MARY. Thank God.

LAURA. Then what is it?

JACK. It's all right, Laura. He's not wounded . . not a scratch.

LAURA. Well, why doesn't he come in? Why didn't you bring him in? [*She makes a movement toward the door.*]

JACK. [*Moving back to intercept her*] Wait. Wait. You can't go yet. There's something I've got to tell you first.

[MARY *nerves herself for a shock.* LAURA *grasps the sideboard for support.*]

JACK. [*Continuing*] He's . . . he's very tired . . . with the journey . . . seems a bit dazed.

MARY. Go on, Jack. Tell us the truth.

JACK. Mother, you're not to take it too hard. It's not dangerous, you know. But maybe he won't get over it for . . . for a long time.

LAURA. But what is it? For God's sake, speak!

JACK. He's . . . gone a bit queer . . . in his head.

LAURA. Mad?

JACK. Yes.

MARY. O, God! My boy! . . . my boy!

JACK. He's not violent, but they say . . . he'll never get over it.

[LAURA *reels against the sideboard, and stares at the door left.* MARY *sinks into her chair,*

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sobbing. JACK *comes down left. There is a slight pause and the door left opens.* JOHN *enters supporting* HARRY *by the arm. He is a young man of twenty-seven, wearing a mud-bespattered uniform. He is quite uninjured physically, but walks like a man in a dream. His face is ashen, his lower jaw hangs loosely, and his eyes have a vacant stare.* MARY *looks up, gives a gasp of horror, and rises. With her eyes still fixed on her son, she staggers to the table, and, resting both hands upon it, stares across at his face.* LAURA, *fascinated, watches her.* JACK, *in an agony of suppressed emotion, loosens his grip on his stick, which falls to the floor. The sound breaks the tension, and* JOHN, *pulling himself together with a great effort, begins to speak.*]

JOHN. It's your mother, Harry lad.

[HARRY *turns his head, swallows twice, and grins inanely.*]

You're home, home!

[HARRY *wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, but gives no sign of recognition.* JOHN *brings* HARRY *down in front of chair left centre.* JACK *sits on couch left.*]

He's a bit dazed, Mother, just a bit dazed. Seems to think he's somewhere else. Harry, don't you know where you are?

[HARRY *smiles again stupidly.* LAURA *comes to back of armchair right.*]

MARY. [*Going to* HARRY] Harry, my boy, don't you know your poor old mother?

[*She gently puts her arms around his neck and presses her cheek to his. There is a pause.*

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Suddenly HARRY *gives a heavy sigh and takes her arms away. She goes right, sobbing.* JOHN *looks appealingly to* LAURA, *who comes centre, and, with a great cry, flings herself into* HARRY'S *arms. He jerks his head back angrily and tears her off, pushing her roughly aside. She falls in front of the table centre.* JOHN *forces* HARRY *to sit left centre.* MARY *stands right facing her son. In the distance the band strikes up "God Save the King." The recruiting meeting has begun.* JACK *instinctively springs to the salute.* JOHN *loosens his grip on* HARRY'S *shoulders, and the boy slumps in his chair. The women watch him anxiously. The music swells.* MARY *bends forward eagerly.* LAURA *leans on his right knee, and looks up longingly into his face.* HARRY'S *mouth slackens, and a stream of saliva trickles onto his coat.* LAURA *shrinks back in terror. He gives a horrible chuckle, and, leaning forward, rubs his hands gleefully together. As the band begins the second verse, he breaks into a gurgling laugh.* JACK'S *right hand drops to his side.* JOHN *turns, facing up stage, and bows his head. The strains of music cease.* HARRY *laughs again, with an hysterically rising inflection.*]

THE CURTAIN FALLS

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